



## The April Reader – Issue 22

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### PREFACE

*The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and user-submitted content. It was conceived as a successor to the Zine Writers Guild. The April Reader aims to become a hub of online writing and content. Operating under the belief that the rise of the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass media and television, The April Reader hopes to serve as a launching point for the future writers of this generation.*

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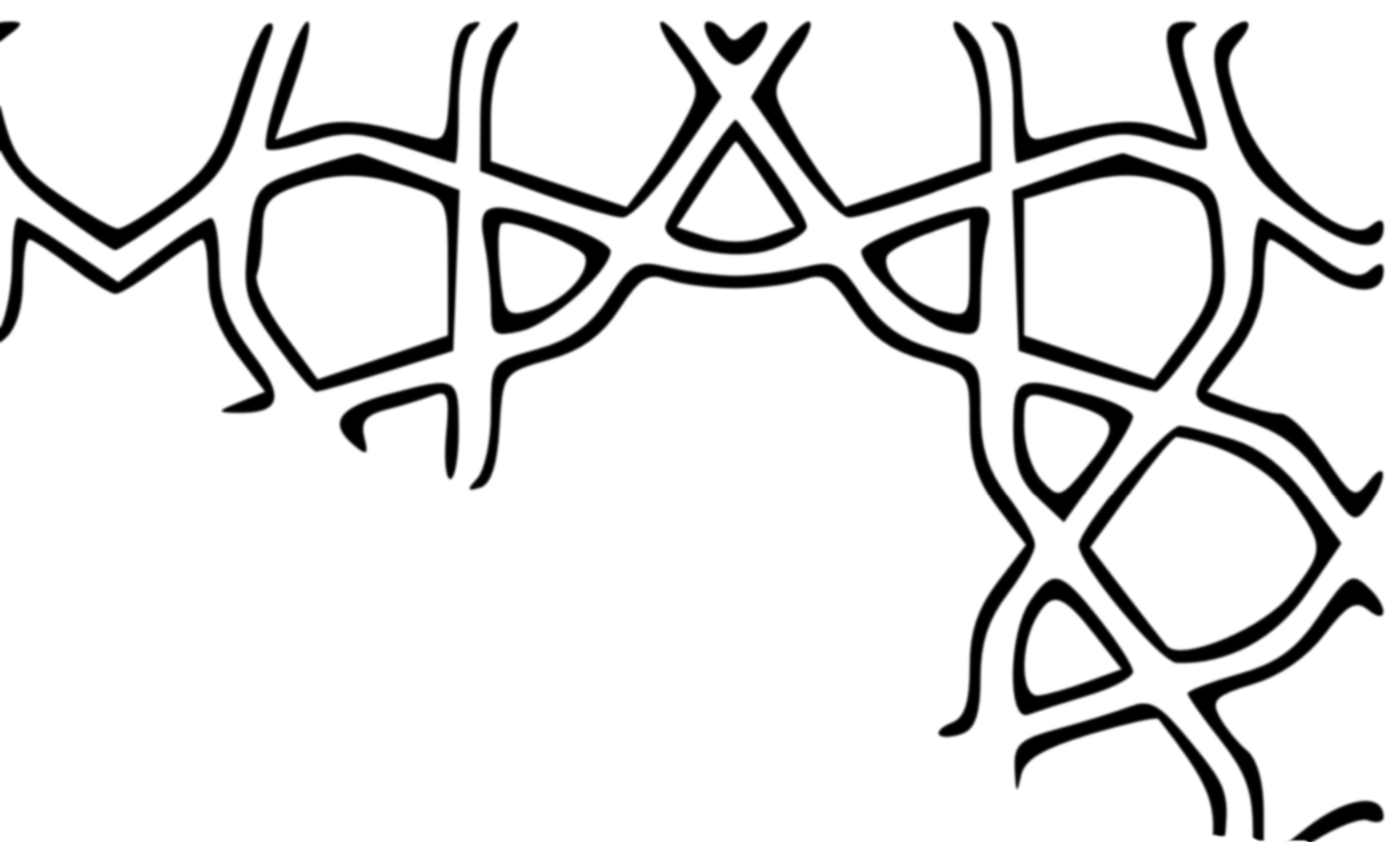
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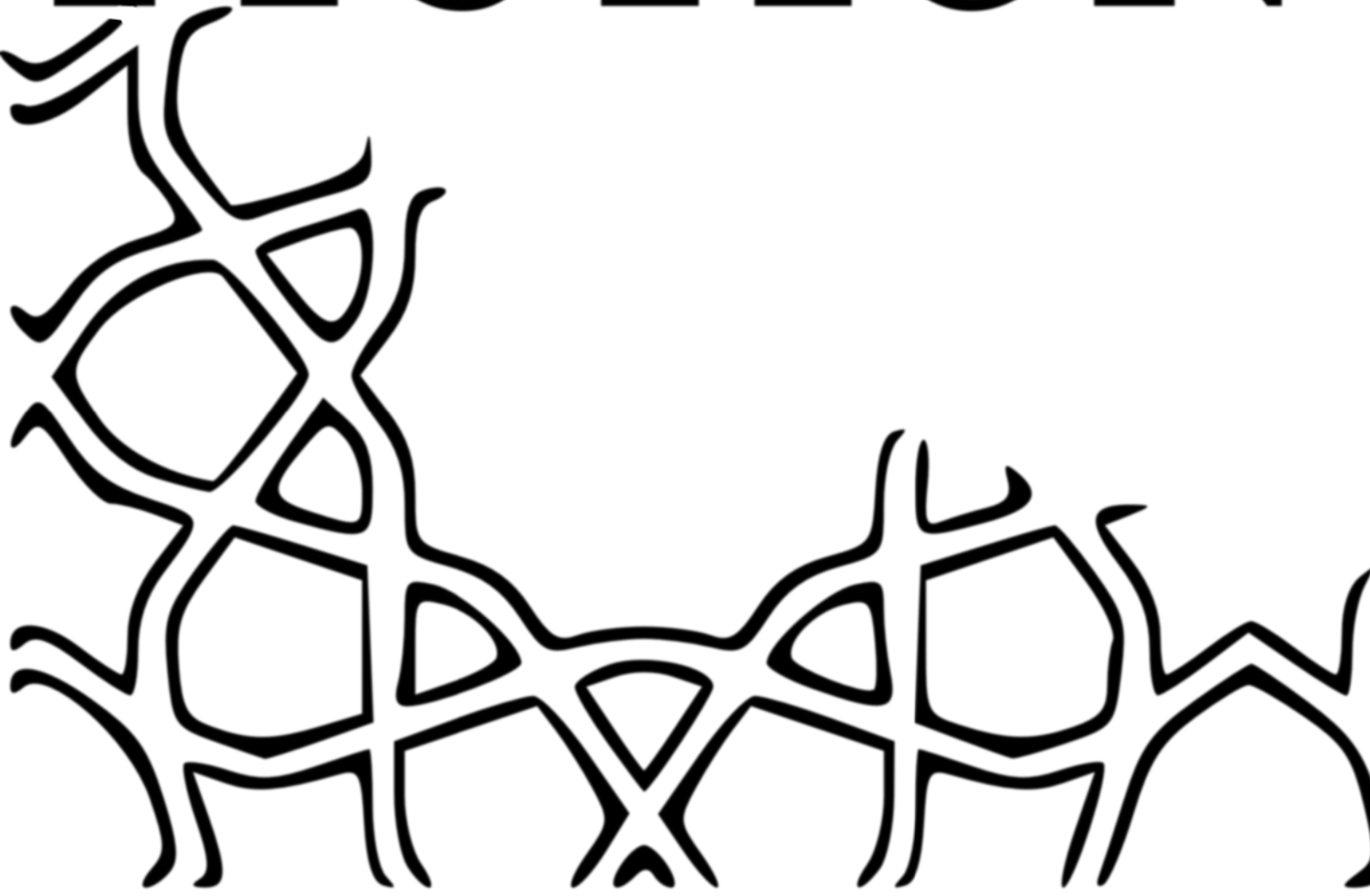
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# FICTION



# JERICHO JONES

The only name he still knew was Jericho Jones. As if his very existence had vaporized into the ether, his identity bent to just what his listeners willed. He no longer mattered in anything but what they heard, and what he could hear – that gathered by his ears and that hidden within his head. He wove a tapestry of sound, trailing through melodies and rhythms nobody else dreamed of, but they bled out of his veins without a thought. Sometimes accompanied by pounding feet, and other times just uncomprehending stares, his music flowed through the stratosphere and into worlds unknown. He could not keep a job, he could not afford a roof over his head, he could not read nor write nor count his change. But, man, could he play that trumpet, could he wail. The way he could blow, they said, he could bring down the walls of Jericho.

Every street corner served as his stage, every lamp overhead his spotlight. He leaned back upon the mojo, his breath steaming from the trumpet's bell, moisture dripping from the spit valve. A fellow drumming on the bottom of a bucket might join in, or another with a pair of spoons. Bouncing off his brick backdrop, his songs reached into every corner before rising to every star. The gullet of his battered porkpie might beg for spare coins, but the music existed for its own sake, and Jericho Jones existed for the music.

Thin as a pencil, he meandered

through a maze of streets, pulsing with the rhythm of the city, his horn hung over his shoulder by a rope. His mouthpiece, lovingly wrapped in a white handkerchief – the only truly clean piece of cloth on him – nestled carefully in his left pants pocket. Sidewalks and gutters, gravel roads and grassy shoulders, he walked them all, casting the seeds of his art upon whatever soil he found. Did he eat? Perhaps he might pick an apple from a tree, or find a sandwich tossed into the upturned hat, but the question seldom even arose. The thrills of his instrument fed his heart, and sometimes he had to smile so big he could not play for a moment.

He was the Pied Piper of joy, leading it around by enchantment. The gift was offered to all within earshot, listening the only price asked. He was master of his talent, passing along his work at no cost, thereby loosing the bonds of owners, sellers and critics. For those with no money, there was no fee; for those with no interest, there was no refund. The music took on life, like the air it rode upon, free to alight upon the sensibilities of any who rose to it. Like a caress upon a sleeping child, its touch might never be acknowledged, but was known of itself.

There came a day when a couple men of obvious means hung at the edge of the crowd, sort of hiding around the corner of a building, as Jericho Jones tore it up. Head to toe

in sharp, three-piece suits, spats and hats, pins and baubles, the two nodded and laughed to the trumpet's siren song. A new inspiration filled his lungs, and his tones pealed through the urban landscape. Under a midday sun, the gleaming instrument could shine no brighter than its own notes, hanging like stars in the sky. They danced a respectably slight jig to the jitter-bugging jazz, whooped in appreciative praise, with "yes!" and "uh-huh!" and "play it!" The meager audience dissipated, a couple of small silver discs fell into the porkpie, and the two lingered.

"Son, you've got no business playing on this street corner," one said. A gold watch chain drooped across his ample stomach.

"I've got no place else," he replied. "One corner's as good as another for me to stand on."

"Let us help you. We can set you up in clubs, in theaters," said the other. "You've got no business playing that music for free."

"Can anything make the music better?" asked Jericho Jones.

"Maybe, maybe not. Won't be able to tell until we put a price on it."

The gigs began small, in church basements and restaurant patios. Soon those venues became cramped, as his audience – the wide world – tried to fit within brick walls. Then he graduated to music halls and nightspots, and the fans poured in. With prosperity came a change of clothes, and a velvet bag to carry his trumpet. Its golden

voice continued to cry out his muse, the inner workings of his heart and soul, as he poured a libation of emotion and empathy upon his willing proselytes. The gospel of music flowed over the land, even three hundred tables alert to its call, worshipping at its altar, prepared to rise in answer as it beckoned the people to its screaming refrains.

Rafters shook off dust, glittering a shower of magic upon eager audiences. Walls seemed to tremble with every stomping beat as the tempo had its way. Metallic echoes of gleeful celebration rang within the halls – joined by lights spinning and flashing quick glimpses of glad faces – a carnival of unhindered bliss. He bent to the notes, his body dancing interpretation to the pain and rapture of each new strain. Fingertips coaxed colors through the valves never before heard, the slide finessing an arc of passion, and within his closed eyes he could see the tones and phrases painting a canvas of melody. A covering of grace flowed from the instrument and over every spirit within the tabernacle.

The moon, round and silver, sent jealous beams from the early morning darkness as the three men walked away along the deserted street. They fairly glowed from the evening's bash, stepping to the beat as it rang within their memories.

"Man, were you hot tonight!" said one.

"You sure can play that trumpet. Enough to bring down the walls of Jericho."

They did not notice the half-

dozen or so men appear from an alley's deep shadows. Burly and ragged, they carried bats and ropes, hitching their jeans as they hurried to catch up.

"You fellas been doing pretty well, haven't you? You're looking mighty fancy," one ruffian said behind them.

They turned, three men in all their finery, and the dim lamplight revealed the teeming menace.

"You fellas seem to have forgotten your place."

"What are you talking about?" said the man with the watch chain.

"You fellas think you're coming up in the world," he patted his bat against an open hand. "Thought you might need a reminder of where you belong."

"We're on our way home now," the man said.

"Not yet you're not," he said, and the bat sent a fine fedora flying through the air with a sickening crack. Down went the man, his blood seeping onto the pavement, but nobody could see in the blackness. Scuffling blows and kicking resistance made mockery of beautiful suits and shoes, and hatred overcame hope. An incoherent mix of muffled groans followed, and hefty cords gracefully arched over the high arm of the streetlight. Ugly nooses hung limply until fitted over swollen and bloodied heads, and two ropes drew taut under the weight of helpless bodies.

A bat fell sharply upon his

shoulder, knocking the trumpet bag loose. As he stumbled upon his knees, he felt his fist tighten around the mouthpiece in his pocket. No, he thought, nothing from you but beauty.

"You really think you can live white, nigger-boy?" a man leaned into him to jeer.

He raised his face to the light, prepared to witness death.

"Hey! Hey, man, wait," one attacker lifted a hand and checked his mates. "You – you're Jericho Jones, aren't you?"

"Jericho Jones!" arose a murmur.

"Yeah," he spat out a little blood.

"Oh, man, you're great! I saw you years ago, playing on a street corner! And that's your axe, right there!"

"Jericho Jones!" a whisper floated over the scene.

He fell to the sidewalk, propped upon one arm, reconciled to fate.

"This here is the greatest musical genius of our time! Man, you should hear him jam!"

A fine feather in someone's cap, he thought, and hung his head.

"Man – we met Jericho Jones! I'll never forget this day! He's the best of all time!"

The band of men had turned suddenly jovial – an inexplicable mix of magnificence and atrocity – and walked off into the darkness. "What

a night! Jericho Jones! Man, can he play!" He sat in stunned silence upon the curb, his legs straight out, his friends dangling above him in awful silhouette.

The voice turned somber. The beat slowed, and tones sank and mellowed into thoughtfulness. A mournful wail lifted itself from the trumpet's bell and called out to the heavens. No more clubs, no more halls. Back on the streets, back on the road, only open skies and solitude would suffice. He hunkered down in dark corners, destitute parts of town left to wilderness, and played out his anguish. Pushing the frustrated notes from his heart and out through the instrument, he sifted his mourning with charity and resolve.

His voice would not allow hatred. Determination, yes, and perseverance, even anger, but the bitter wickedness of hatred had no home there. The phrases drooped under their new burden, lines repeated two and three times, because there was nothing more to say. Smooth and velvety, a darker timbre flavored his accusation. A slow vibrato shook his cry, and his knees supported the horn as sobbing tones fell muted by the sidewalks. Still he played, refusing the silence that might also mean safety.

Over bridges and through woods he trudged, seeking something that he didn't know, but what he thought might bring peace. The travels returned his clothing to the rags he remembered so well, and wore his shoes down to paper-thin shreds. These things mattered little, as he searched the sun and sky for new reasons to hope,

dappled light cutting through the waving shade of leaves overhead. Invisible song fell like rain, birds well-hidden within the branches, not caring what had passed and what might come. They left no trace of existence except their song, and he could hear it and know them to be birds, though he could not see they were birds. "I am a man," he said, "though they don't see me." He raised his trumpet again, from the back end of a caboose tearing around a curve, and a brilliant blast of defiant joy echoed off purple mountains.

His art could not be stilled, nor either his humanity. Stirred again within, the grace of his muse returned, the supernatural inspiration that makes more of one than what he is returned, as he weighed the vain valuations of the world. Brassy melodies again flowed from him like a rushing stream, bumping smoothly over unexpected nuances, forever bubbling along with glad anticipation. The music spoke with new authority, with new purpose toward not just accommodation but enlightenment as well, a new light to shine upon a forlorn land. And on one day he found his audience again, the audience that would truly listen, and he lifted his voice before an immense crowd gathered around still waters, gathered to hear Jericho Jones preach.

Stones, cold stones laid one upon another make a wall, as do hearts of stone. And he played before the giant stone image of a white man, on an early April Sunday morning, he played before the temple, and his song rang out over the people.

# The Hedonistic Pains of a Young Man

He stared at an amorphous stain on the wall. The phone was dialing. How would “Macho Man” Randy Savage do this? Maybe simply saying, “I would like to have sex with you for money”, in a deep enthusiastic yelp with nice embellishments of “oh” “yeah” and “baby” would work.

The stain morphed into a familiar face.

Speaking to another human was going to be hard. It was going to be his first time speaking to someone that wasn't the same self-loathing grocery store employees. Though they were just frames of implied responsibility, he always pictured the 16 year old bag boys as being hard working single parents of six. The innocent young boy had to put three children through college, two of them were in preschool taking naps and learning that sharing is not only caring but very fun, and one of them was just at that moment (or any moment) twenty five miles away was getting an award for academic excellence in a middle school.

This was turning into a bad idea. Sweat began to creep down his face.

“The wealth of human experience is so limited yet immortality is out of the question.”

Did he dial the right number? Is she already asleep? What time do “working girls” go to sleep? It is

only 10pm. Aren't they supposed to be so called “women of the night”? His hand gripped the phone tightly as he grew more aware of his current state of desperation. Sweat trickled down his back.

Wiping his sweaty face, he hangs up and dials a number from a chocolate ice cream stained Baskin Robin's napkin.

There was a knock at the door.

Before even opening the door, a hand was already held out in greetings by a short, round and semi-sleazy guy carrying a heavily annotated Bible accompanied by a tall curly haired companion with his arm in a cast and fierce blue eyes that remained wide, awake and aware. The short guy was nervous to the point of shaking and was dressed like he was Biff Lowman from a high school stage adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*. The sweating young man hesitantly shakes Biff's extended hand, nods at the frightening partner and introduced himself as Hern. Biff introduced himself as Diego and his scary companion as Michael.

They were “studying theologians” (these still exist?) that believed that God was not only “the Father” but also “the Mother”. Diego went on a tangent about women being the bearers of life and pointed his fat sausage-like fingers at a highlighted phrase in Genesis concern-



ing Adam and Eve. Hern tried to pay attention but over time each word that fell from Diego's mouth melded together until it was just one gigantic collage of sounds that consisted of the words "mother" and "revelations".

Could it be possible that the prostitute he was trying to call was the second coming of Christ? If God was a woman why would she send a male to do a deed a woman can? God should be a feminist by now. Especially since it was coming to the "end of days", why wouldn't she send a prophet from the most marginalized group of people in the whole world? Wasn't that her MO?

Judging from Heaven's website ([http://www.heaven-tangible-angle.ruz\\*](http://www.heaven-tangible-angle.ruz*)) furnished with sparkles and tons of expensive flash coding, she must have been somewhat popular. She had trailers on her site where she would reenact scenes from big budget Hollywood films to show off her Victoria Secret-like figure in a feel-good-Mel-Brooks-kind-of-way. One of the more strange reenactments was a scene from some psychedelic western that must have been very popular in her country. She wore a black leather overcoat riddled with "bullet holes" underneath that was a black studded leather bikini which matched her knee high cowboy boots. She was walking on a bridge to nowhere with her hands extended like she was Jesus on a cross and her raven black hair whipping in the desert winds. Her body was perfectly centered in the frame. A group of men off camera were firing at her, hitting her hands, feet and skimming the side of her naked torso. Each infliction

was followed by a close up of the wound then the camera would pull back and an obnoxious "boing!" would sound revealing her with one less article of clothing until she was finally naked; walking with her hands extended bleeding from the wounds of stigmata. After the 45 second clip was over, the name Heaven written in large glowing cursive covered her breast and underneath a phone number, web address and tagline, "God's only tangible angel", covered the rest of her body.

Heaven was the number one priority.

Diego finishes his speech and asks if Hern is interested in "salvation". Looking at Michael's bloodthirsty eyes, Hern began to connect the dots. They already knew his identity, his address and probably much more. The cast on Michael's arm and Diego's long speech were changing shape. They must be part of a cult. Michael must be one of their enforcers. The cast must have been used as a weapon in multiple homicides in the area. All of them involved introverted kids like Hern Harem that were naïve enough to open the door at 10pm to strangers. Inside the Bible could have been anything. Under the few pages Diego showed Hern there must have been a switchblade long enough to skewer a pig. Inside of Diego's Biff Lowman suit there must be a 9mm pistol cocked and ready to fire in any denial of salvation.

The sweat began to drip down face.

Hern was interested in salvation.

## starlon h

He left his email and phone number on a sheet and even set up a date later in the week for Diego to talk more about the transformative power of Mary's Breast Milk.

Reality was getting too real. Experience was getting scarier.

The stain on the wall was painfully present.

"The wealth of human experience is so limited yet one must find heaven on Earth."

Hern dialed the number again and within seconds someone was knocking at the door.

Did he give Michael a bad look?

Hern learned his lesson for the night, he looked through the peephole but there was no one there yet the knocking continued. Hern opened the door to find a young boy around the age of seven years old with a drawn on moustache. He was wearing a Baby Gap replica of a Humphrey Bogart suit from the Maltese Falcon. In one of his hands was an unlit cigarette in another was a lighter that he flicked a few times until it was finally lit and the door was completely opened.

This must have been a joke.

He puffed at the cigarette once and grounded it into the door frame in an exaggerated display of dominance. He made eye contact with Hern; his round childish face was a strange dichotomy to his tired eyes. In a strangely deep voice for his frame, the boy asked for his money in a rhythm and accent borrowed from Joe Pesci. His hands moved in

large circular movements to show how angry he was despite the fact that his facial expression never changed.

Hern had no clue what he should say to Lil' Scarface. What do you say to a child dressed like a 1950s dick and speaking like he is Joe Pesci?

From the elaborate sentences made up of "fuck", "shit", "motha fucka" and many other colorful language, Hern heard the name Heaven and everything made more sense than before and exclaimed, "Ohhhh".

"Yeah ohhh, yah motha fuckin creep, give me the motha fuckin money. Goddamn mothafucka." Hern gave the boy his credit card, which the boy swiped into a card reader he pulled out of his sports jacket. "How long?" The boy asked. Hern never gave this much thought. The boy gave a pad to Hern so he could put in his PIN all the while calling him a "goddamn motha fucka" until the receipt was printed and signed by Hern.

ONE HOUR IN HEAVEN – \$500

The boy probably couldn't resist the pun. He said "I gave you a discount since you are a virgin and all" and winked. Within seconds Heaven was walking towards Hern's door.

The stain was screaming in praise.

Was it just the lights or was she glowing? She radiated beauty. Upon passing Heaven the boy slapped her on the thigh and said "have a good

one". He must have gone to the corner store to buy a 300 "Baby Bottle Pops" and a mini-lighter.

She wore a white prom dress that was cut perfectly at her calf to show enough skin. She had her breast artificially enhanced to be bigger than a human's head.

In Hern's one bed room apartment, they sat on the bed and looked at each other with sideward glances. Her teeth were yellow and coughed regularly. Judging from her tar-filled voice she smoked at least two packs a day.

"Experience is the measurement of one's life."

The stain was shouting. Its voice once had strength but was now strained. It was the voice of Marcus Harem, the famous libertine motivational speaker.

The pain grew in Hern's chest. He remembered the day when he heard of his brother's death.

The brand new Porsche was bundled up like an accordion. The CD trapped inside the gnashed metal was Kanye West's *My Beautiful Twisted Dark Fantasy*.

Impact happened on the 3:44 of track three, "Power". "It would be a beautiful death". In the passenger seat was his gold-digging prescription drug addicted wife that he needed. They both died on impact. Glass entered every pore on their faces. The metal cleanly severed limbs from bodies. Their essences were smudges and stains on the concrete. Their only identification was the license plate on the once

expensive car.

Hern tried to wipe the tears from his eyes.

His best friend was gone.

"Macho Man" Randy Savage would never do this. Hern leaned onto Heaven's lap and sobbed.

"Can I call you mother?"

She nodded and gathered him close to her breast.

She smelled like cigarettes and vanilla.

She patted him on his back in a slow rhythm.

He brought his legs up to his chest.

She stroked his messy hair.

The stain remained mute.

The child was safe.

# some adieu to nothing

They sat where she had chosen. Off to a corner of the grand, wooden bar. In artificial darkness, they murmured to one another, leaning closer and closer to make out the outline of the others mouth. He is sitting open, legs spread towards her, tentatively drinking his beer. A perceptive eye could see small tremors in his hands as he holds the bottle. She has jammed her legs right into the gap that his legs have left. She's caressing him not so much sensually but with a sense of pride, with a forceful glow of enjoyment. The bar is full, but empty of interest. The slim, well-made bartender dotes over two mustached twenty somethings in XXS small jeans. The three of them are grinning and trying "his latest invention" shot. (straight outta webtender dot com). You can notice all three of them have tattoos of some kind. The bartender's got a reef design that from a distance resembles a melting clown. You could spot a glint of a jesus fish on the neck of one of the hipsters as well.

A middle aged couple on a date sits between the darkened couple and the potential threesome. Well, the embers of a date. She is entertaining herself with her menial updates and photos while he fumbles for his fourth rye and coke. With each glass he swears the bartender is watering them down more and more. On this drink he's screaming and waving his arms

wildly, shouting that he'll bottle these "mother fucking faaaaaaaag-lites if they stiff me on my stiff one one more time." The bartender seems more interested in getting his palm read by the redheaded "fag-lite" than addressing his customer. Behind the patrons the bar is full of empty tables and dirty pitchers. A wednesday night.

Back to the darkened duo. She has finished her second drink, he's still plugging away at number one. Yet he is still noticeably drunker than she. She is still pressing herself into him obvious, almost holding him in place with his thigh. He appears to be ignoring the purpose behind her movements. or feigning to ignore. It's unclear whether he altogether minds, or is simply joshing, or rejecting her. What once filled the air as the sound of bullshit small talk (they'd already covered his love of the 80s and her take on the new WoW expansion) is now dead. They are staring at one another. Or she is staring, and whenever he catches her eye for more than 4 seconds he jerks again, contorts his face and apologizes. This goes on for a while. Longer than you would like, or he would like, and especially she would like.

She is done up in a short black dress and tights, meticulously struck lashes, and large, attention grabbing earrings. He is a blue/white button up and red tie, an outfit tussled together. He is a pipe

cleaner contorting to life's challenges, she is a bull, smashing them all aside.

Other patrons come and go. One elderly couple, as they leave, speak of a "hot time for \$60" and laugh off all looks from the rest of their company. The slim, clownish bartender is joined by another, burlier one with a distinctive stronger mustache. He's calling everyone at the bar "young fella" despite his age. He, and everyone else, is pretending not to notice the trainwreck in the corner. Glance back to the corner. He is recounting some past failures she didn't ask to hear about, she is nodding impatiently. He has ordered another beer, she checks the time. It's still early, but the night is dragging its feet.

But time eventually passes, and as it does she begins to warm up to him again. (though with the way they're sitting, being warm was never really an issue) The second beer goes down much quicker than the first. It is getting harder for him to ignore her obvious attraction to him. Even noticing that she notices him notices he plays dumb. He is making the conscious choice to not pursue her, and she's dragging him along just the same. On the next interlude of eye contact and apology she grabs his head and pulls him into her. It resembles a kiss, at a certain angle. Then he eases into her, and they sway in place. She embraces him as the kiss persists, and he is even stroking her arm in a feeble attempt to reciprocate.

This is all done on barstools, mind you, so everyone else at the

bar has the image of the two of them leaning too far in, only to catch one another in mid fall. Well, more like she is catching him mid fall and he's so gracious to have someone catch him. He's spasming for joy in her arms.

The initial shock of the kiss is gone. She begins marking off time, kissing up and down his bearded cheek and neck in counted measurements. They're breathing that familiar, heavy breath you associate with animalistic intent. Everyone else at the bar has let out little jeers and cheers not loud enough to disturb, but fill the moment with background noise. But if they looked really closely, they'd see him hearing them. She, close eyed, kiss kiss kiss, doesn't see (or at least he didn't believe she saw) his eyes wide open mid kiss. He seems bored, or conflicted, or simply drunk.

The two dudes, all ass slapping and having fun, go off in the direction of the back alley with the slim 'tender. Must be done work. The obnoxious drunk's date had long since slipped out the front, as the drunk congratulates the new bartender for "knowing how to make a fuh-ucking *good* drowned turkey." Two new young guys come into the bar momentarily to escape the rain. They begin whispering as they see the two falling bodies in the corner, climbing up one another, giving mutual mouth to mouth. They can hear the few words that they are saying to one another. "save me" she says without a hint of irony or sincerity. "work with me" she breaths, and dots each syllable with a kiss, a stroke, a bat of her large eye lash. He's swooning, but

## Kieran Hunt

maybe with anger, or fear, or a belch he REALLY needs to get out.. "I'mma weird situation unto myself" he stutters, obvious uncomfortable by now. He is looking at the group of guys, now leaving, whispering and nudging one another at his expense.

The bartender interrupts this lovely moment to inquire about the bil. She scoffs, breaks away from his face with a small push and goes to her purse, fingers tracing his body as they linger passed him. He reaches down (way down) to grab his wallet from the bottom of the bar stool. He almost actually falls, but catches himself. She was busy searching for change. They pay too little, and don't tip, and go to leave. The bartender and the obnoxious guy call after them as he opens the door for her, and she rewards him (unasked) with a kiss.

Like two meager sparks, they flit for a moment, then disappear into the black from whence they came.

# Fires Dark

It was an hour before dawn, with the The Light Guard on another routine patrol around the village. The Light Guard was always on alert—ever since the Great Burning a thousand years earlier, vile creatures roamed the forest at night.

Young apprentice Guard Milos stood with an ash wood spear in his right hand, and the smooth cylinder of a light caster in his left. He leaned by the Eastern Gate, watching the faint shadows play across the wooden houses of the town. He had been born and raised here—the city was all he knew. The people in it were all he knew. The outside world was practically a thing of legend, and not the good, cheerful legends either.

Hornil stood on the other side of the gate, his eyes half closed. It didn't fool Milos. Though the old guard pretended to be infirm, there was probably no man in better shape in the entire village. His skill with the bow was legendary. Milos shook the night cold from his feet and thumped his spear on the stone wall, the *tap tap* noise echoing into the night. Hornil cracked open a single eye, glaring at the apprentice with disdain.

“What is it, apprentice?” He asked, his breath fogging in the air. Milos shrugged, looking upward.

“Why do we guard the wall,

Hornil? It's not like anything could get past it, anyway. Not unless we let it in. Its too cold to be standing outside.” Hornil grunted, and spat into the dirt.

“We guard the wall because we are the Light Guard. That's what we do. We protect the people of this village from the dark, and the creatures that go *bump* at night.”

“What creatures? I haven't seen any. Manticores, boggarts—they're old wives tales.” Hornil's eyes glittered.

“You'd be surprised what the old wives know, boy. There's a reason they live to be old.” He grunted and pulled his spear from the dirt, shaking himself bodily. “I'm going to piss. Mind the wall.”

“What—you're leaving? Can't you do it over there?” Milos indicated to an old shrivelled tree near the bakery. Milos was only an apprentice, after all, and still unused to the *bumps* of the night. Hornil grinned.

“I'll be back. Nothing to be scared of with the wall here, right?” He sauntered off into shadow, humming a deep tune as he went. Milos clutched his spear tighter.

“Nothing to fear.” He whispered to himself. He glared at a torch that burned in the distance,

## Mathias Loe

imagining the warmth and light it provided. “Nothing to fear.” He looked at the light caster in his hand. Light casters were ingenious inventions, and the main tool of the Light Guard. They could expel beams of sharp, bright light; strong enough to dispel or even kill any monster one might encounter. They could also be used to signal, in times of distress.

He took off the light caster’s covering, exposing the thin glass panel and the mechanism beyond it, surrounded by the dark, rough outer casing. *It’s just a fancy stick.*

“Hullo!” A voice exploded behind him. He screamed and whirled, leveling his spear at the old woman who stood behind him.

“What on earth did you do that for?” He yelled, driving the butt of his spear back into the ground. “I could have killed you!” The old woman shrugged, her smile showing yellow teeth outlined by black gums.

“Sorry, youngling. I often forget about the soft hearing of youths today. Never hear anything till it’s too late. I need you to open the gate.” She indicated toward an old cart and the thin milk cow that stood behind her, surrounded by a herd of goats. “Got to take ‘em out to the pasture. Dawn is coming.” Milos frowned. He wasn’t sure he was supposed to open the gate. But Hornil wasn’t there, and it *was* almost dawn. He could see the brilliant orange of the sun, brightening the sky. He looked at the lady, back at the sun, and then shrugged. He lifted the heavy bar with a grunt, and pushed the gate open with an

ominous creak. The light of the torches stretched out into the night, and died before it could reach the woods.

“Thank you, young Guard.” The woman said, leading her rickety cart and small herd into the forest. Milos thought it eerie, watching them leave. It was clearly dawn, from the light in the east, and yet...

Milos shut the gate, and struggled to lift the bar back into place, before deciding to leave it where it was. He brushed his hands free of dirt, and turned to see Hornil coming back. He took one look at the bar on the ground, and his face darkened.

“Why is the gate unbarred?” Hornil demanded.

“An old goat woman wanted to take her beasts to the pastures before dawn. I just let her out.” Hornil’s eyes widened.

“Dawn?” He turned and walked backward until he could see over the wall, and the bright light in the east that grew stronger and stronger. His hand gripped his spear until it turned white, and he turned to Milos, his face pale.

“Foolish boy. That is no sunrise.”

\*

The captain of the Guard addressed the assembled force with a hushed and hurried voice. “Second squad, go west. The First and I will follow the path east. We need to find that woman and bring her in-



side before whatever it is that is making that light gets here. You also need to scout the area, try and see if you can figure out what we're up against. Don't wake the town yet—we need to do this quickly and quietly. Ready?" Milos and the other Light Guards nodded. Hornil came up beside him and took a deep breath.

"Do you smell that, apprentice?" He asked.

"What? The town smells as it always has."

"No," Hornil said. "I smell sulphur. You should be ready, for whatever we see out there." He clapped him on the back. "Survive, and I just might make a full Guard out of you." With that, the two groups were ready to depart, and they marched out of the gate and into the dark wood.

As the second squad turned west, Milos watched the first follow the path toward the light. They were more likely to find the woman, as the most common pastures lay to the east, but they were also in more danger. Only the more experienced guards were in the first squad, and you didn't become experienced in the Light Guard without your fair share of fearful moments. But those were mostly raiders and wild animals. This....this was monsters.

Or at least, that's what everyone thought. Milos listened as the other members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> retold tales they had long forgotten, about chimeras and trolls and demons. They were afraid; he could feel it. Perhaps that was for the best.

It wasn't long before they reached the first clearing. The woods were often cut back near the path, so that bandits and the like couldn't ambush travellers. As they walked, they couldn't help but imagine that something was in the woods, watching them, and waiting for one of them to stray from the trail. The newer Guards huddled closer to the more experienced ones, and regretted skipping training and laughing at the tales of their teachers. Milos watched the woods with frightened excitement. Suddenly, the squad commander called a halt. There were forty five of them, and the word spread down the line that blood had been found, and ample amounts of it. They formed into rows and stood at attention.

"Fan out," Their captain said. "Don't go too far from your neighbours, and keep your light caster in hand. If you see anything move, shout and shoot. If you start to lose sight of the path, head back." They nodded as one, and began to comb the wood in an ever widening circle.

"Do you see anything?" A guard asked. Another responded no, and the answers elsewhere were the same. Milos headed deeper into the wood, and then he heard it.

It was like the snapping of a thick twig, and it was always followed by a gurgling noise. He waited, and when he heard it again, faint and distant. He turned to call out, but then thought better. No doubt if he called out, whatever it was would escape. Or worse, it could just be another guard, acting foolish. It was better to find out first.

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He snuck forward, keeping low and to the trunks of trees. It wasn't long before he couldn't hear the sounds of the Guard—the trees would do that. The mysterious sounds, however, just kept getting louder, and louder. He was on the verge of turning back, when he came to the top of a small ridge, and in the small dell below, he saw it.

Its body was the darkest black, only broken by thin rivulets of magma that oozed through cracks in its skin and set the ground around it sizzling. The air was strong with the smell of heat and sulphur, small plumes of smoke rising from the trail of dark, burnt foot prints the creature had left behind. Its eyes were large and pale white; focused on the meat it held in its hands.

*It's eating one of the goats,* Milos thought, when he saw the faded grey carcass lying not too far away. The snapping—slurping sound he had heard before revealed itself to be the creature sucking the marrow from the center of cracked bones. *I have to tell the others.*

He didn't dare turn around, so he simply inched backward slowly. When he could no longer see the creature, he turned and made his way back a bit faster, though not enough to attract attention. His heart beat wildly, and he was sure it would give out before he could warn his companions.

Finally, after what seemed like an age, he came to edge of the forest. The rest of the Guards had finished searching, and were gathered once again on the path,

talking as they waited for stragglers. Milos breathed a sigh of relief.

“Look out!” One of the guards screamed, pointing at Milos. Terrified, he dropped to the ground just in time to hear something pass quickly over his head. He rolled over and stared into the salivating face of the creature from the wood. Before he draw his sword or even scream, the air hummed with the sound of bowstrings, and four arrows sprouted from the chest of the beast. Scalding hot blood fell on Milos' arm, burning him like boiling water. He screamed. The beast shrieked, baring milk white teeth and a crimson tongue, then leapt straight into the trees above and out of sight.

The Guards lunged forward and dragged Milos from the underbrush, silent in the face of the unnatural. Their Captain was visibly shaken, but he pulled himself together quickly.

“Nice shooting. Boy, are you alright?” Milos nodded, his arm an angry red. “I don't think we'll be seeing him again.” Captain said. “Back to the village, men. We need to warn the people that there are ifrits nearby.” The soldiers all started talking at once.

“Ifrits! But they don't exist!”

“Didn't they die in the Great Burning?”

“I heard they caused it!”

“Why do we need to warn them? Didn't we just kill it?”

“Do dead things jump seven feet into the air?”

“Quiet!” Captain yelled. “We can discuss history later. Ifrits move in groups. This one probably strayed for some reason, likely—“

“He was feeding.” Milos said. The Guards turned to him. “I saw him. He was eating one of the old woman’s goats.” Captain nodded.

“Then it looks like the first squad may be too late. Come on. We have to warn them.”

\*

They found the first squad a mile out. They had sent fifteen or so of their party back to the city to wake it and prepare it for anything, and the rest of them had continued past it to find their searching brothers. Milos had insisted that he be brought along, even with his burnt arm.

The first squad had had thirty men in it, all highly experienced and prime fighters. By the time the second squad found them, nineteen were dead, four missing, five wounded beyond saving, and two were able to drink water. Of the two, one had gone mad, and the other had lost nearly half of his face, though he was so deep into shock he hardly seemed to notice.

It was a chilling reunion.

Captain immediately tried to take control of the situation, but he was clearly out of his element. Every man in the first squad had been a higher ranked Guard than he was, and now...

“Captain, look.”

There, in a nearby tree, was the old woman. She was pierced with stone spikes longer than a man’s arm, and as thin as a spear shaft. They kept her propped up, even as the blood congealed around the base of the tree, already crawling with all manner of insect. One of the guards retched.

“The Ifrits did this?” Milos asked. He had searched the faces of the dead and the dying—Hornil was nowhere to be found.

“Aye, these stone spears are their handiwork. Obsidian.” The captain said. His eyes kept roaming back to the old woman, then leaping away again.

“What do we do now?” A guard asked. The captain stared at the ground, then took a deep breath and turned to face the squad.

“Our next move is simple. We head back to town, and defend it until help arrives. No Ifrit shall breach the gates so long as men of the Light Guard still stand.” He cast one look at the bodies around him. “Leave the dead. If we’ll bury them another day.” The captain gathered his things and began to march in the direction of the town. His final words hung in the air, along with the unspoken thought—*if we live to see another day.*

\*

The ambush went like this.

Milos’ hand had been acting up, sending pain lancing up his arm with every step, slowing him down

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until he found himself at the back of the column, with the medic and the wounded. They walked in silence, every man peering at the tall, leering trees that rimmed the edges of the road, every pair of eyes searching for the attack they felt was coming. None of them saw it.

Just as a bend in the road came into view, the first Ifrit leapt from the top of a nearby tree and slammed into three men walking, sending them sprawling, screaming as magma fell from the Ifrit's skin and chewed through their flesh and armour. The creature's descent had been so silent, no one had noticed it until the men were on the ground.

The column exploded into action. Spears went up into formation, and archers nocked arrows to their strung bows. Within seconds of the initial attack, a dozen arrows were ready to be fired.

But the Ifrit was gone.

"Steady!" the captain cried. "Hold your lines! These demon bastards aren't done with us yet!" As if to confirm his statement, more Ifrits came from the trees, this time screaming and howling at the top of their lungs. They slammed hard into Guardsmen, though a few were impaled by the spears; their hot blood setting the wooden shafts ablaze.

More Ifrits launched themselves from tree tops, screeching so loudly that ears began to bleed. Dark shadows began to move in the underbrush—obviously a larger, thicker variety of the beast. One dashed out of cover and made for the Guard line, and it took a score

of arrows alongside half a dozen spear wounds to bring him down. It still managed to slay three Guards, and the others became bolder after that.

"Milos!" the Captain cried. Milos turned and turned, but in the confusion and yelling and screaming, he couldn't pinpoint where the voice was coming from. Suddenly, a figure hurled itself toward him, the scent of blood and dirt suddenly overpowering. Milos turned to run, but a hand lashed out and grabbed his shoulder, yanking him backward. "Milos, calm down!" The Captain shouted over the battle din. "You have to get out of here." Milos' eyes were almost as wide as the Captain's. He could see a long, dark gash across the front of his chest, and a puncture wound in his left thigh. The Captain grimaced.

"You have to warn the village. The Guards—they must know about this." He pulled him closer. "Run, and don't stop until you're at the gate, do you understand me? Go!" He pushed him away, and the Captain watched as Milos dashed out of the ambush and into the dark wood beyond. There was no way to be sure he would make it, but any chance was more than what they had here.

The Captain turned toward the main body of fighting, and watched with an almost confused look as his men were cut down, torn apart, and sent burning to the afterlife. *How did it get so bad, so quickly?*

"Captain!" A man cried. He turned to see their only healer running towards him, a bloody sword in his hands. He looked terrified,

but then, he would a fool to look otherwise. “Captain, we have a problem.”

The Captain threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing off the blood stained road and into the silent trees.

“Just one, healer?” He spread his arms wide. “You’re going to have a busy night.” The medic’s eyes darted around, fearful, then focused on the Captain.

“You—you’ve gone mad.” The Captain’s eyes fell.

“Not mad. Not yet.” He glared at the medic. “Shouldn’t you be with the wounded, anyway?”

“You don’t understand. The babbling one, the one we brought from the First Squad. He, he *transformed*. A demon, a—a devil, some sort of creature from the darkest hell.” Tears ran down his face freely now, staining tracks in the grime that coated his face. “Even worse than these beings.” He whispered.

“You killed him, then.” The Captain asked. The medic paused, and then gave a short nod.

“He murdered the other wounded men before we even knew what was happening. Then he leapt on John’s back, and bore him to the ground with his weight: weight he didn’t even have, ten minutes prior. His claws dug into John’s back and burrowed forward, toward the heart. By then, the screaming and roaring had us running.” His eyes lost focus. “If the wounded are turning into these creatures, we won’t stand a chance.” The Captain chuckled.

“Look around. We didn’t stand a chance from the beginning.”

\*

And indeed, it was true. The fighting had died down, only a few pockets of resistance remaining, and it was only by blind luck that the Captain and the medic hadn’t met their ends yet. The Ifrits were moving among the dead and the dying, some finishing them off, but most were feeding. The moaning and the crying from those too weak to stop themselves from being eaten alive, was the saddest sound the Captain had ever heard.

“Captain!” The medic shrieked, and the Captain turned just in time to see the medic yanked off his feet and hoisted into the air by a one of the larger Ifrits. Others were closing in as well, and the smell of sulphur was starting to stifle the air. The medic gave one last scream before the Ifrit plunged his already bloody muzzle into his stomach, goring and chewing even as the lava that oozed from the creature’s flesh sent his blood sizzling. A fine mist of red stained the Captain’s face.

“So this is the end.” He said with a desperate, mad laugh.

“No.” A musical, light voice said. He turned, and saw one of the Ifrits standing behind him, his eyes almost—pitying. “This is the beginning.”

Milos stumbled through the woods, running as fast as he could while doing his best to stay on his

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feet. The night sky was black and starless, though a faint breeze blew through the trees.

He didn't know how long he ran. He ran until he couldn't hear the sounds of death and battle, until his feet hurt and bled, until he wasn't even sure if he was heading in the right direction.

Then came the answer to his prayers—he could finally see the lights from the town. They lit up the sky on such a dark night, and before long he could hear the sound of iron clashing and people moving. The Light Guard, preparing for war. He picked up his pace, focusing more on getting home, to safety, than where his feet fell. He ducked a branch, rounded a tree, leapt over a small creek—

And saw a man standing alone.

He skid to a stop, and before he could blink his light caster was in his hand. It was the only weapon he had left.

The man turned. Milos' mouth fell open, and his heart leapt for joy.

“Hornil!” He cried, tears blurring his vision. He ran forward and threw his arms around him, squeezing him close with no care for the older man's sense of pride.

“Let me go,” the older man said, but he held on tightly, his voice laced with sorrow.

“I thought I lost you,” Milos said, pulling away. Hornil sighed.

“I truly wish you had.”

A sound like a thousand cannons smashed through the wood like a gale, picking Milos up and flinging him into a nearby tree. His eardrums burst, bright pain lanced up his spine, and the world went dark.

\*

When Milos woke, Hornil was standing over him. He looked relatively unharmed, though there were long scars that flecked his face like whiskers. Milos moaned, and when he tried to move, found he couldn't.

“Hornil,” he whispered. “Hornil, I can't—I can't move.” Hornil mouth moved, but no sound came out. “What is it Hornil? I can't hear you!” he said louder, and then abruptly he realized that he couldn't hear his own voice, either. *I'm deaf*, he thought.

\*

Hornil frowned at the boy that lay in a pool of blood and leaves, broken and bruised and foolish. Things would have been easier if he had died on the road, or in the ambush. Instead, he had found his way here, and there was nothing to be done. From the direction that the sound had come from, Hornil could sense something approaching. He stood and waited for a while, and then he saw them.

A thousand Ifrits, walking, crawling, and climbing toward him, beating drums of war and carrying their obsidian weapons. He took one last look at Milos, and then

Hornil stepped aside.

An Ifrit stepped into his place.

This Ifrit was taller, and darker than the other ones. He smelt less like sulphur and more like simple heat, if heat had a smell. He stood above the broken boy, watching as Milos' eyes widened so far they might burst.

"You said the villagers would be taken care of." The Ifrit said in its melodious voice.

"It's one small boy." Hornil said. "It was chance that brought him here, no fault of mine." The Ifrit paused, turning slowly to look at Hornil with a glare of utter disgust.

"But it *is* your fault. You said they would be taken care of. And you *lied*."

\*

Milos nearly wet himself when the Ifrit had come into view. He had almost no control of his neck, and so when that dark and fiery face had leaned into view, he was sure that his life was over. But instead, it started *talking*. Though he couldn't hear the words, he could see that it was speaking. Something about *pillagers* and *vault* and *lied*. The face disappeared from view.

His neck began to tingle, as if it had been asleep, and was now waking up.

Experimentally, he craned his neck forward. There was a slight pop, but it moved painlessly enough. From where he lay, he

could see the Ifrits advancing on Hornil.

But they weren't fighting. They were—arguing?

And then he understood.

Hornil wasn't fighting the Ifrits, because he was in *league* with the Ifrits. He had helped them kill his brothers, and he was helping them take over the city.

A chill went down Milos' paralyzed spine.

\*

"You can't do this." Hornil spat at the Ifrits as they closed in around him. "I helped you, I led you here. You *need* me!" The leader of the Ifrits hissed, the sound of a kettle boiling over.

"We do not need you. You called to us because you are weak. We came, because we are strong." It lunged.

\*

The Ifrit was toying with Hornil. Milos could see it, and he wondered how his one-time mentor could not. The ferocity with which the Ifrits had attacked them in the wood, the speed and strength they had displayed—it all pointed to a being totally outclassing a mere human. But the Ifrit let Hornil draw his blade and fight back, while the others sat waiting, like vultures circling a carcass.

Milos had gained some use of his arms, as he laid in the dirt. He thought he might eventually regain

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control of most of his body, but unfortunately he knew he wouldn't live that long. Once Hornil was dead, the Ifrits would move on to him, and then his city.

He couldn't stop them, but he could at least exact revenge.

Milos' hand was still clenched around the shaft of the light caster. The lens was cracked and something inside rattled, but he hoped it would be good enough for one shot. Two, if he was fast enough. He lifted the caster and took aim.

Hornil parried a blow from his left and brought the sword down toward the Ifrit's head, but he was too slow, and suddenly his opponent wasn't there. He spun on his heel just in time to turn a second strike, and a third, and a fourth, until abruptly, he was on his knees, his sword sunk into the ground half a meter away. The Ifrit chuckled.

The light caster hummed as it built up its charge. Three more seconds...

The circle of Ifrits closed in, their leader raising one hand with its long, dark claws extended.

Two seconds...

Hornil surged to his feet with a yell, but his time to fight was done. The surrounding Ifrits pulled him down, one slicing the backs of his knees so that he could not rise again.

One second...

The lead Ifrit circled behind Hornil, what almost passed as a

smile breaking its features as it readied the killing blow...

Zero.

With a sound like air rushing into a vacuum, the light caster sent a beam of light an inch thick screaming across the wood, lancing toward Hornil with a scent like lightning. The air supercharged in the split second that beam existed, and half a second after it died, a boom shook the trees as the air compressed. A hole the size of a catcher's mitt was burnt into Hornil's chest and out his back, and he was dead before he hit the ground. The Ifrit behind him was dead, too.

*One shot.* Milos thought, shifting the light caster so that it rested beneath his chin. If there was any good left in the world, he wouldn't die by the hand of these monsters from the wood. A high pitched keening began to spread throughout the wood, as the Ifrits realized what had happened. It got louder and louder, and then deepened to a collective below, as those nearest to him dove for Milos.

There was a scream, and a flash of light.



# After Life

The ghosts came slowly at first. It started with her husband four months after his death. She had been sitting on the couch watching a documentary on the lifecycles of stars. The raspy voice of the narrator had just begun speaking about the main sequence when she noticed him standing near the wooden rocking chair. His hands were in his pockets, and his eyes were fixated on the public broadcasting program. He didn't even look at her until she cleared her throat, and then all he had for her was one word.

“Hey.”

Charlotte had become accustomed to life without Adam. The late night crying, the ice cream binges, the marathons of their wedding video, the lack of desire to do anything but stay home and watch PBS. Once he returned things fell back into their normal routine. It was odd at first wearing something other than yoga pants, and no longer being able to sleep in the middle of the bed. She once again had to deal with the hunting channel being on before she went to sleep, and all the windows remaining open through the night. It was as if Adam had never left, yet the ease at which they fell back into routine was slightly terrifying.

Six years back, old Mrs. Peters had lost her husband to a tragic boating accident. When he came back she threw a block party, which Mr. Peters was not delighted about at all. He didn't come back to socialize, he came back to drink beer and sit on his recliner. Mr. Peters disappeared one year later, after Mrs. Peters passed away. Although their story was relatively happy, not all stories were so pleasant. One of Charlotte's friends from college, Kyle, lost his wife two years ago. When she came back the same euphoria surrounded them for a few years until Kyle found his wife sleeping with another man. She filed for divorce and moved to Tijuana with her new living lover. Charlotte had no fear of Adam cheating on her, yet if the only way for them to remain happy was for her to die in a year she wasn't content with that either.

When Charlotte expressed these fears to Adam he burst out in laughter, and as he attempted to calm down he looked up at her and said, “You're ridiculous Char, but that's why I love you.”

The line between before and after Adam's death began to become erased, with the only reminder that he was not alive being three bullet holes on his chest. The first time Charlotte saw them was that first

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night as they were lying in bed. The three holes were small and clean, and when she laid her head on his chest they smelled faintly of blood. The edges felt smooth, and she couldn't resist but wedge her pinky into one of them. It was cold and soft, and the pressure against his skin was enough to wake him up from his unneeded slumber. After that she couldn't stop staring at them. At night she memorized the circumference of each of the three wounds, and kissed each one before falling asleep

The second ghost showed up six months after Adam came back. Adam had been mowing the backyard when a toothless man stumbled into the petunia patch. Charlotte's temper flared as she saw her flowers being stomped on by the elderly gentleman in calf length jeans.

"Get off! Get off! Get off!"

She had sprinted from her seat on the patio right into the line of vision of the man, but once she was close enough she realized that he probably couldn't see her because of his severe cataracts.

"Adam! Make him get out of the flower bed!" she turned to see her husband still mowing the lawn, as if ignoring the situation would just make it go away.

"I don't know what you want me to do honey."

"Get him out of the flower bed," she repeated it, slowly and through gritted teeth.

"Look he's gone," Adam shrugged

as Charlotte turned and noticed her crushed petunias minus one old man, "Problem solved."

The next time the old man showed up was when Charlotte was taking a shower. She stepped out to find him napping on the blue tile floor. He had a pink towel draped over him and there were crumbs in his white beard. She didn't want to deal with him with no clothes on, but by the time she came back fully dressed he was gone. Then the man started appearing in random places: stuck in a cabinet, behind the curtains, sleeping at the foot of their bed. It took Adam chasing him through the dining room and pinning him down for them to finally figure out he was dead.

His name was Herbert, and he had apparently died somewhere between two weeks and two years ago. He wasn't sure; in fact he wasn't sure about a lot of things. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was lost, and needed a place to stay. Adam and Charlotte had never even wanted children, let alone an old man with a tendency to drool on himself. They tried to explain to Herbert that they weren't ready for that kind of commitment; it wasn't him it was them. Despite their best efforts, Herbert's soul must have been connected with the home because he refused to leave. The couple had no choice but to allow Herbert to stay, but under one condition: he would live in the backyard and stay away from the flower garden.

After agreeing to house Herbert more ghosts began appearing. Charlotte would find one staring at Adam as he slept, one drinking her

coffee in the morning, one using her toothbrush. The worst experience Charlotte had was when she found her dead mother-in-law replacing her wedding pictures with snapshots of Adam and an ex-girlfriend. Luckily it was the first week of the afterlife book club, so Adam wasn't home, and Charlotte chose not to mention the incident to him. Eventually the ghosts became a problem, and the couple wasn't ready to turn their home into a habitat for the dead.

"I found another one today," Charlotte stated as she sat on the bathroom counter, watching Adam brush his teeth, "She was washing our windows."

"Well that's great; we now have a free maid."

"You're not funny," she punched his shoulder, "I have no clue why they all insist on coming here."

"Maybe they have nowhere else to go."

That's when they had an idea of putting 'found ghost' posters around town. The calls came in waves, along with the grateful families who drove from all over to pick up their dead relatives. Minivan after minivan carted away the ghosts who had made their way into the couple's home. It didn't go unnoticed by those who remained that their families weren't coming for them. A few of the ghosts were adopted by families in the neighborhood, and those that weren't spent their days in the backyard playing poker with Herbert.

It was a comfortable existence,

and perhaps the ease of the situation blinded Charlotte to the changes occurring. She failed to notice when the flowers on the front porch stopped being watered until they were all but dead. A young ghost named Molly had taken over the responsibility of the plants surrounding the home. It had been a responsibility Charlotte was slow to release to a dead teenager, but Molly proved herself worthy until the flowers withered.

"Molly!" Charlotte pushed her hands into the large bushes in the front of her house, grasping to see if the teen was hiding in one of them. She had already searched the home, the backyard, and most of the front yard so the only explanation was that Molly must be hiding.

"Honey, what are you doing?"

Charlotte pulled her hands out of the bush and let out a sigh, "Have you seen Molly?"

"No," Adam ran a finger over a withered daisy, "But you think she was in that bush?"

"I can't find her, and she's stopped watering the plants."

"Well she did lose her watering bucket."

"Last week. She could have asked me to go get another one."

"I'm sure she'll show up," Adam assured her, like he always did, "Now come inside, you look like a crazy woman digging through our shrubbery."

Molly never reappeared, and

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everything related to her vanished. Adam convinced her that Molly had simply run away like a standard rebellious teenager. Charlotte accepted this theory and reverted back to taking care of her own plants. She didn't begin questioning it until a month later when she received a call from a worried caretaker who hadn't seen her ghost in days.

"No ma'am I'm sorry I haven't seen...what did you say his name was again?"

"George. He's in his sixties and very sweet gentlemen. He was wearing flannel the last time I saw him."

"Oh," Charlotte remembered the old man who used to get in constant fights with Herbert. The two would play card games, and both accuse each other of cheating, "George never seemed like one to run away, but he only stayed with us for a few weeks before you came along."

"No, George wouldn't have run away, so I suppose my suspicion is confirmed. He must have moved on."

"Excuse me?" Charlotte moved the phone from her left to right hand, holding it close to her ear, "Moved on?"

"He won't be showing up anymore, I suppose he has no reason to be here. Well thank you for your help dear and I may come by later this week to see your selection. I got quite accustomed to having a ghost in the house."

"Yeah stop on by, and I'm sorry about George."

"Don't be sorry, it was his time and who was I to stop it."

The woman ended up stopping by later that week, and adopted two ghosts this time, just in case one moved on. That phrase, *moved on*, it had been replaying in Charlotte's head since the phone call. It soon became a normal occurrence for the ghosts to complain of things going missing and while Charlotte worried, Adam ignored the ghost exodus.

Adam began spending more time with Charlotte, explaining things like oil changes, chainsaws, and the difference between a Philips and Frearson screwdriver. Charlotte felt as if he was training her. He made her change the oil in her car, and when a light went out he guided her on how to fix it. During this time he began using her toothbrush after he couldn't find his, and she noticed him wearing the same shirt numerous days in a row. It was a slow, sinking feeling that crept into Charlotte's being with the words 'moved on' repeating in her head.

"Why are they leaving us?"

She asked as she rested her head on Adam's chest, her fingers searching through the fabric for the bullet holes. The questions had been keeping her awake at night, instilling an unknown fear inside of her.

"Who?" Adam yawned out of ritual, one of those living things he did to make Charlotte forget that his heart wasn't beating.

"You," she moved her hand up to

touch the scruff on his neck that he would never be able to shave off, "You're going to leave. Just like the others."

"Don't be silly," he chided as he turned and wrapped her up in his arms, "I'm never leaving you. The others don't have anyone here, that's why they can leave. As long as you're alive, I'll be with you."

"Yeah," she whispered as she buried her head into his chest, "You're right."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Over the years Charlotte had become too comfortable with her husband and their dead houseguests. The line between the dead and the living became blurred, so when the house became silent yet again she wasn't sure what to do. It took two years for all the ghosts to disappear. She was happy to see some go, the destructive ones that would break her fine china and reorganize her living space. Others she missed dearly, the ones she could have conversations with about what it was like after death, the ones that helped her with the menial tasks, and took her side in arguments against Adam. Occasionally they would send her signs from beyond: a petunia that grew in the dead of winter, a dingy watering tin on the front porch, and finally a small bullet.

Adam left on a windy spring day. Charlotte knew he was gone the moment she woke up alone, in the middle of the bed. The first thing she did was put on some yoga pants

and drink a cup of coffee. She waited for a while, hoping Adam would walk through the backdoor smelling of freshly cut grass. His face would be stained with sweat, and he would grin before kissing her and going to take a shower. When she went back into her bedroom she found the small gift. The bullet rolled in the palm of her hand, and as she held it between her fingers she noticed that it would make a hole the perfect size for her pinky. She kept it on her bedside table, and on the nights when she became lonely she would grip it tightly until a small circle marked her hand.

POETRY

# civil-writes

By Jerry Whalley

?what does a Spiritual-Person look-like?  
do they dare to look and look and see,  
with an essential-self in-congruency,

are they sloppy-solipsists for-soaking sentimental-reality,  
hail'd by Mary everywhere on their pinnacle of doubt,  
cross'd in-divinity, individuated against impossible odds,  
a magnificent rebellious-angel both within and with-out,  
so illuMentated with a fiercely-individual light,  
or are they more often under  
understood and out-of-sight

do they make meanings so merCuriously aware,  
do they wear super-fantastic under-wear,  
naked just-there, between their inner-whirl'ds and  
outer-air, expediting creative-destruction's negative-space,  
a certain semi-someone somewhere  
    so enthralled with all the rush  
        at the speed of life  
    rolling with their body of cycles to  
        cross the thresh-hold of push and shove  
just to make-nice...or

are they just innocent victims like you and me,  
lost between infinite-Love and "I'm not worthy"

# Untitled

By basedpoetry

asking with soft tones  
leads to hard truths

jumping from a great height  
can feel remarkably similar to flying and  
it is  
i just didn't know until now that  
the feeling in my heart  
//for all the ways it branches//  
reaches only for the evening sky  
and the setting sun



# Two Months of Drought

By John Grey

Gravel roads are all dust clouds  
from the pickups.  
Farmers' wives are  
this scattered congregation

swapping pews for porches  
and that broad blue sky  
for an altar.  
Some guy, late teens

is parked on Main Street  
with his elbow out the window,  
chewing on straw  
and just watching and waiting.

Outside the feed store,  
men talk angry  
but just above a whisper  
because God's in the doghouse  
but they don't want Him knowing.

Old man's waiting for the bar to open,  
scouring dry out of his collar  
with the back of his fingers.  
Another cuts himself shaving,  
watches the blood drip in awe.

The fields are brown as chewing tobacco.  
If the cows were any thinner,  
their skin would be on the inside.  
The roof on the tiny school house  
buckles like an old John Mellencamp album  
left in the back of a char-boiled car.

The Lutheran pastor's down in the cellar  
trying to fix the air-conditioning.  
Mayor's on the phone to the weatherman  
in Des Moines.  
The drought's a killer, says the Sheriff.

But it's the horse thief who gets locked up.

# have you the cheek

By Maja Topic

a wrapper spoke to me,  
it said,  
'sap is not your daily bread'  
yet still i will embrace  
the leaves  
as exit signs form  
boundaries

down the corridor  
and write!  
compelled  
i am  
to smite my bike

i want to ride my bike  
Queen  
B  
A  
C  
Easy as my numbers, lost  
to in-numerous goths  
strolling down the shopping mall  
'depression at a cost'  
restless for bouncing ears  
a shuffle moves a cross  
congealed to my exterior  
where flies lay eggs  
to crack a code  
digital or audio?  
a stream, where loiter  
mourning folk  
or so they'd like to knock

where idiots are born  
because  
some crackpot had to fuck.  
basking in the reflected glory,  
at the end of luck  
where lunar is the sun  
in nose, and plastic drifting  
up  
supposes global warming  
hazards a new beyond  
a thumping over corner,  
standard for the lore  
stumped by over-compensation  
for my lack of jaw

# Calque Deux

By Levi Rainham

A calque crafted  
for you my  
calico queen

who shiftlessly shed  
this droll adult'rine

Drunk-dregs  
dandy-dry  
& grain-sodden supine

& suffering silt-filtered  
twain softness  
between

This loath-Theorem lotharian  
Sloth-threaded grammarian

my gilt-dais  
Silk-skin frays,  
drab diēs Sabine.

# Banished/Vanished

By JMR

We wander the city streets at night  
among joyful groups of more than two.  
Selfish, I know, but I can only walk  
when its just me and you.

These nights I only echo, “right, I see...,”  
but listening, I am for once at ease.  
I wonder as I look down at my feet,  
if you see me smile at times like these.

Then a long silence before I look back  
to see you standing no longer near.  
“Is something the matter?” you ask,  
with a face sincere, the face that I fear.

Here again I mustn’t offend with a lie.  
Must I rend forth this truth, this winding reply?  
Must I face the tired look that says, “I tried,”  
and continue to walk as if nothing had died?

# Desert Fathers

By Matthew Martin

emerald spires,  
what secrets do you contain?  
unforgiving sand,  
cannot stop your upward quest.  
you are a pious ascetic.

# looking down

By 1c7

from above  
exposed bone under a scratch.  
mismatched galleries,  
uneven corridors,  
sprout like weeds,  
roots deep.

it  
they  
grow(s) like a tumor  
and  
overtake the mountain

organic labyrinths,  
home to the forgotten,  
encircle the city  
"proper".

from above  
as if a giant nail  
had scrapped the valley forests  
and revealed the flowing blood  
and bones beneath.

# Crossroads

By Citizen 17

I'm not immortal  
And that I regret  
Something will break soon  
And it will be me

I see you with me  
You won't set me free  
Where I belong?  
Help me find out

Two ways to choose  
Two ways to go  
Just one is correct  
Got designs for the both

I'm lost in the mist  
Help me get out  
People are cruel  
Unlike you

## INFORMATION

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\* \* \*

### STAFF

#### EDITORS:

Prole !XDERDXUpqQ  
Michael Petrobon

#### ARTISTS:

Bantha\_fodder

#### Special Thanks To:

Demitri Shakhray

\* \* \*

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